“CHINESE LOWESTOFT”
IN THE HELENA WOOLWORTH McCANN COLLECTION

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Helena Woolworth McCann was unrivaled as a collector of Chinese Lowestoft. She traveled throughout Europe in search of precious examples, while her agents were active even in far-off China. Those who have seen her unique collection at Sunken Orchard, the McCann country house at Syosset, have marveled at its beauty and at Mrs. McCann’s charming arrangement of it. The collection is so extensive, however, that to show it as a single unit would overtax the spatial resources of any museum. Realizing this, Mrs. McCann’s children, Mrs. J. V. McMullan, Mrs. Helena W. Guest, and Frasier W. McCann, have divided the Chinese Lowestoft into two equal parts. One part is lent to the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston by the Winfield Foundation, which Mrs. McCann’s daughters and son formed in memory of their mother. The part lent to the Metropolitan alone numbers over two thousand items, of which as many pieces as possible are now shown in Gallery D 6 as our latest special exhibition.

As almost everyone knows, the name Lowestoft is the result of one of the famous mistakes in art history. Until William Chaffers (1811-1892), the noted English authority on ceramics, took up the question, the ware was commonly known as East India China. It was the Chinese porcelain of the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries produced for the European and American markets and fashioned in the Western taste. Although at times executed with predominantly Chinese motives, it was always designed differently from the porcelain made in China for home consumption.

This ware completely misled poor Chaffers, for in his Marks and Monograms he described East India China as being made not in China at all but in the little East Anglian town of Lowestoft, where, indeed, a somewhat similar English porcelain had been made during the second half of the eighteenth century. For a long time so many accepted Chaffers’s theory that even now, when the truth is fully out, no amount of scholarly exorcism can banish the word Lowestoft. Although the more exact phrase “Chinese export porcelain” is sometimes used for it, like so many colorful misnomers “Lowestoft” is evidently here to stay.

Oriental Lowestoft has, of course, two cultural backgrounds, China and Europe. China and Europe, though in every way alien to each other, met in foreign trade. Of the varied results of that trade, one of the happiest was the creation of this export porcelain. In the China trade, then, we have the full story of Lowestoft.

So we turn first to China. Vast, self-sufficient, aware of its own grandeur, China of the age of Lowestoft was even more completely sealed off from the eyes of grandeur, China of the age of the most despotic modern state. Chinese rulers would have none of “barbarian” cultures. Yet they were not averse to engaging in profitable trade with foreigners. So they attempted to do business with the outside world and still remain untainted by the contact with it. This doubtful policy is strikingly reflected in the careers of two of China’s great emperors, K’ang Hsi and Ch’ien Lung.

During the long reign of K’ang Hsi (1662-1722), commerce between East and West experienced a slow, steady growth. K’ang Hsi showed a penetrating interest in European affairs—not, however, that he trusted Western peoples. Shortly before his death he warned his successors: “The Europeans accomplish everything they undertake, no matter how difficult the task appears. They are intrepid, clever, and ready to seize their opportunities. So long as I live China has nothing to fear from them. But if our government should become feeble, Europeans could do with China as they wished.”
This emperor felt strong enough to conclude a treaty with Russia and to open the port of Canton to European merchants. China’s huge trade in Lowestoft for a hundred years was a result of K’ang Hsi’s policy.

His grandson, Ch’ien Lung, is a still more familiar name in Lowestoft history, most of this ware being produced during the six decades of his rule (1736-1795). In a number of ways Ch’ien Lung fostered foreign trade, but he went beyond his grandfather in spurning trade relationships. Typical of the Chinese attitude were his letters to George III of England. “You, O King,” he wrote, “live beyond the confines of many seas; nevertheless, impelled by your humble desire to partake of the benefits of our civilization, you have dispatched a mission bearing your memorial. . . . I have perused your memorial: the earnest terms in which it is couched reveal a respectful humility on your part, which is highly praiseworthy. . . . It behooves you, O King . . . to display even greater loyalty in the future, so that by perpetual submission to our throne, you may secure peace and prosperity for your country hereafter.” And George III was the ruler whom American colonists called tyrant! The mere writing of these words shows in what a world of isolationist fantasy Ch’ien Lung and his people were dwelling: in foreign affairs he was the chinoiserie emperor of a porcelain never-never land. Goethe, whose view of China at that time was a common-sense one, called the Chinese “crystallized humanity.”

On the European side of the China trade a different situation held. Europe was interested in engaging in commerce with all countries; in his famous treatise on The Wealth of Nations, Adam Smith wrote of foreign trade as the logical outgrowth of national industry. It was, then, inevitable that through its various East India Companies, Europe should enter the China market.

The East India Companies, of which the Honorable Company of England furnished the classic pattern, represented some of the surplus energy of fast-growing Europe. The men who founded Company agencies and commanded Company ships were actually planting the farthest outposts of Europe. By a quick shift of flags they could change their ships from peaceful merchantmen to formidable men-of-war. Woe to the weak who stood in their ruthless path! What could be more revealing than the Company memorandum of 1627 which has this to say of the China market: “Concerning the trade of China, three things are especially made known unto the world. One is, the abundant trade it affordeth. The second is, that they admit no stranger into their country. The third is, that Trade is as Life unto the Vulgar, which in remote parts they will seek and accommodate, with Hazard of all they have.” Enticing as this prospect of China trade was, the Company was to wait until the eighteenth century to reap its harvest. Until then only the Portuguese were able to approach the mainland of China; they alone were allowed to settle on the island of Macao, not far from Canton. Their ships and the junk of the Chinese carried goods to such ports as Bantam in Java and Surat in India, where the British and other nationals had a chance at them. To all but the Portuguese, this was a dribbling sort of trade.

By the sheerest accident the foreigners who were to vivify the China trade in the eighteenth century had as allies a little group of men who alone among Europeans found welcome in China. These were the Jesuits. Although they eventually failed in their mission to Christianize China, beyond their wildest dreams they succeeded in bringing to Europe knowledge of the Chinese way of life. They were China’s press agents to the Western world, their translations of Chinese classics, their histories and letters finding wide circulation throughout Europe. Thus it was owing largely to Jesuit activities that by the end of the seventeenth century, when the China trade was still relatively insignificant, China and things Chinese were held in singularly high regard. It would indeed have pleased the Jesuit fathers to know that the French court at Versailles celebrated New Year’s Day, 1700, by a Chinese fête and that the century then beginning would be the age of chinoiserie.

The Jesuits could have claimed some credit too for the fact that porcelain, then a chief
vehicle for the artists of China, was to occupy a similar place in the roster of the Western arts. Fashionable Europeans of the eighteenth century vied with one another in acquiring fine specimens of the ware, whether European or Chinese. And the factories that sprang into existence following the discovery at Meissen in 1709 of the principle of porcelain manufacture were the playthings of kings and princes. Porcelain itself, with its shimmering surfaces, broken contours, and varied tones, even came to symbolize the rococo age.

Such was the enthusiasm for porcelain that European factories could not begin to meet the demand. Chinese factories, on the other hand, could do so, and did. Hence the enormous trade in export porcelain, much of which was the Chinese Lowestoft shaped or decorated in the Western taste.

For the origins of Lowestoft, we turn to Canton, China’s great outlet to the sea. The story is not generally known, so we give it in some detail, beginning with the events that were to make Canton the chief and finally the only port open to foreign traders.

The successful venture of the East Indiaman Macclesfield to Canton in 1699 marked the real beginning of East India Company trade there. The presence in Canton even at that time of an “Emperor’s Merchant,” through whom all foreign business had to be transacted, showed that K’ang Hsi’s government already favored this city over rival Chinese ports. In 1720, to meet the increasing trade—the English East India
Company was firmly entrenched in Canton by 1715—some leading Cantonese merchants with the approval of their government formed a co-hong, or guild. These were hard-headed businessmen, out for profit and little concerned with the grandiose pretensions of their Pekinese monarchs. In dealing with foreigners their co-hong had the combined powers of the OPA and FBI; its controls were strong enough to check unscrupulous traders, yet not quite onerous enough to dissuade honest ones from returning.

In 1757 Canton’s triumph was complete: Ch’ien Lung by imperial edict forbade trade with foreigners through any other port. And three years later the co-hong received a formal charter. Although subsequently reformed, it continued to control all foreign commerce until England, following the Opium War of 1839-1842, forced the opening of other Chinese ports.

The records of the East India Companies and what we know from the porcelain itself fit snugly into this general pattern. We see how trade in Lowestoft steadily increased during the first half of the eighteenth century, how it reached its zenith in the seventeen-fifties, and thereafter declined. By the beginning of the nineteenth century comparatively little of the finer type was being produced.

Soon after the creation of the co-hong in 1720, the Cantonese set aside a section of the waterfront just beyond the city walls—the city itself being forbidden to foreigners—and built there a series of establishments known to them as hongs and to the English and Americans as factories. A combination of warehouse, office, and living quarters, these hongs were for more than a century used by merchants from almost everywhere. Voyagers of the days of the China trade agree that few harbor views equaled the picturesqueness of the hong area, and in paintings by Cantonese artists we can still see the curious buildings, set cheek by jowl and identifiable only by the flags flying before them. The American traders, it is pleasant to learn, were called the “flowery-flag devils”; they were, alas, also named “second chop Englishmen.”

If Canton was imperial China’s Port of New York, then Ching-té-Chén, the city of kilns, was its Detroit. Some four hundred miles inland from Canton, it was the most highly industrialized city of the Orient, with a population in the eighteenth century of about a million. Although remaining generally unknown to the West, Ching-té-Chén has for centuries been the porcelain capital of the world. It still is today, for the simple reason that near by are found the richest deposits of kaolin and petuntse, the raw materials essential to the making of porcelain.

Even two centuries ago Ching-té-Chén was remarkable for its system of manufacture, curiously like our own assembly-line methods. The French Jesuit, Father Entrecalles, writing of the city in 1712, stated: “It is surprising to me to see the rapidity with which the various vases pass through so many hands, and I am told that a vase that has been fired has gone through the hands of seventy workmen.” In its appearance also, Ching-té-Chén must have resembled many modern industrial towns. Here is Entrecalles’s vivid impression of it: “The sight with which one is greeted consists of volumes of smoke and flames rising in different places, so as to define all the outlines of the town; approaching at nightfall, the scene reminds one of a burning city in flames.”

Almost all Chinese Lowestoft was made in Ching-té-Chén. The manufacturers worked hand in glove with the Canton merchants, who in turn were in rapport with the European traders. A nice result of this was the “Pattern chests” sent to agents of the various East India Companies in Europe. The samples they contained made ordering easy. Just how the Chinese evolved the shapes and designs for these samples is not altogether clear; we know, however, that European pottery was dispatched to Ching-té-Chén and that European prints were often copied, either exactly or with considerable freedom.

It was not easy to transport the porcelain from Ching-té-Chén to Canton. The route followed a meandering inland watercourse, and at one point a mountain pass had to be negotiated by caravan. When the porcelain arrived in the Canton area it received its final decoration in the form of painted enamel, for there, rather than in Ching-té-Chén, were the artisans skilled
Punch bowl. The concert is after a print by an unknown British artist. Porcelain made in China for the British market about the middle of the xvIII century.

In the use of what the Chinese called “foreign coloring” (yang ts'ai). These colors resemble those of the popular famille rose porcelains, to which indeed Lowestoft is closely related. In the painting of coats of arms, so frequently found on it, the Cantonese had to have exact models to go by. These accompanied the orders from Europe and may often have been in the form of book plates, on which the tinctures too were indicated.

Low manufacturing costs based on coolie labor enabled the hong merchants to sell their export porcelain at a price that meant great profit to all concerned. Witness to Lowestoft’s cheapness was the enviable practice of one Englishman, working in 1769 for the East India Company at Canton, who would “never suffer the servants to have the trouble of removing a tea equipage, always throwing the whole apparatus out of window or downstairs.” Curiously enough, this young man was named Pott.

Porcelain was purchased with specie and by an exchange of goods. The English had both the money and the goods to exchange. The less affluent Americans, who had little of either, solved their difficulties with typical Yankee ingenuity. They sent their craft on the dangerous trip around the Horn and along the Pacific Northwest coast to trade for furs, especially that of the sea otter hunted by the Oregon Indians. The Yankees then headed for the South Sea Islands, where they purchased mother-of-pearl, tortoise shell, sandalwood, and dried sea slugs. These commodities, sometimes paid for in blood, were welcome exchange when at last their ships reached Canton. Thence they sailed homeward, by way of the East Indies and the Cape of Good Hope, ballasted with erates of Lowestoft destined for countless sideboards and tables.

The majority of the McCann pieces are armorial. Most of the arms have been identified, so we can divide the collection into groups based on the markets for which they were made. There are groups made for the British (including both England and Scotland), for the markets of Portugal, Holland, and Denmark, and for those of various other continental areas, some of which remain undetermined. Finally there is the Lowestoft made for the American trade.

These groups keep a consistency of design.
that is most illuminating. In ordering porcelain, the respective East India Companies saw to it that the men of Ching-te-Chên and Canton followed the fashions popular at home. It was surely the ability of the Chinese to accommodate themselves to the idiosyncrasies of European and American styles that led to Lowestoft’s enormous success throughout the Western world.

We begin with the British type, for it makes up approximately half of all the McCann porcelain—not surprising in view of the Honorable Company’s dominant position in the East. Outstanding are the nine dinner services, each averaging about one hundred pieces. Five are armorial services, bearing the arms of Gordon Grierson, Newman, Newton, and Reid. Two others show the monograms of unidentified owners. The colors of these English services are restrained and show the Britisher’s continuing affection for the blues and whites of much Ming and K’ang Hsi porcelain. The shapes of the various pieces—tureens, platters, plates, cups, etc.—changed during the eighteenth century to correspond to the shapes fashionable in Europe. The designs, which in the first half of the century were often strikingly oriental, changed in the latter half to types almost completely European. Typical of the early style, both in shape and design, is the Newton service; the Gordon service represents the later style.

There are six tea services. One displays the Hammond arms, while another bears the arms of an English Shipwrights’ Company, as yet not identified. A quaint miniature service bears the monogram M.M.
Teapot with the Hayes arms. Porcelain made in China for the British market during the third quarter of the xviii century

There are also various single dishes from services, many of which are armorial and which together give a complete picture of the development of Lowestoft for the British market. We have, for example, a dish with the arms of Carr (Martin in pretense), decorated in the style of Adam, and an openwork plate in black and white bearing a characteristic design by Bartolozzi.

Last but not least is a series of extraordinary punch bowls. One, of mid-eighteenth-century workmanship, has representations of concerts, both Chinese and European, the latter after a print by an anonymous British artist. Another bowl of similar date shows various nautical emblems on the outside and a dramatic scene on the inside: the East Indiaman “Haeslingfield in Distress, Sep. 12, 1743.” A mammoth bowl of slightly later date is devoted to scenes of fox-hunting. It is truly magnificent, both in size and decoration.

The next group in order of importance is that made for Portugal, whose merchants during the eighteenth century had to compete with their continental rivals for this Europeanized ware. The extent of their operations is shown by the variety of specimens in the McCann collection. Of the several large Portuguese services, three are armorial—those for the families of Saldanha de la Albuquerque, Araujo de Acebedo, and Sylveira—and the first of these is the most extraordinary. It was made during the third quarter of the century, when one member of the family was Viceroy of the Indies; the service is most colorfully decorated with fish, game, and vegetables, with a ham supplying the central motive.

The Saldanha service is also unique in hav-
ing several pieces not of porcelain but of enameled copper. Their presence in this service underlines the curious fact that the enameling of porcelain in a full gamut of colors began in China as an offshoot of enameling on copper. What is even more curious, the latter technique was one that had been developed by the French at Limoges. Presumably it was brought to China sometime during the seventeenth century.

Among the Portuguese pieces is the handsome armorial dish in green and gold bearing the arms of Dom Antonio José de Castro, who was elected bishop of Oporto in 1798. Another dish, as an inscription indicates, was part of a nineteenth-century service made for the palace of the Governor of Macao. One of the most delightful of all the McCann pieces is the platter on which is painted a sailing vessel made about 1810 for Miguel Alves Sousa of Macao. It is from the service once actually used on the ship we now see on the porcelain.

Still other notable pieces for Portugal are decorated with scenes taken from European prints. Racy mythological scenes and fêtes galantes, painted in primary colors, seem to have been Portuguese favorites.

The other national groups of Lowestoft are smaller than the British and Portuguese. Outstanding among the pieces made for the Dutch market is the handsome dish with bearings long thought to be those of Mme de Pompadour but now identified as the arms of the Amsterdam Snoecks. As in their paintings, the Dutch showed an inclination to marine subjects: ships
flying the Dutch flag are the central motive of several of the McCann cups, saucers, and plates. Another Dutch favorite was porcelain whose design, based on European prints, follows almost to the last line the tools of the printmaker. One such dish is after a print, Pèlerins de l’Isle de Cithére, by Bernard Picart, a French engraver long active in the Netherlands. It even copies the sepia tonality of an old print.

Several pieces have been identified as Danish, and these rank among the most luxurious of all Lowestoft productions. The cup and saucer illustrated in color on the cover are Danish, the ship on the saucer’s border flying the flag of Denmark. These pieces seem related to the extensive dinner set of which the principal decoration consists of ciphers within two cartouches. Doves billing in the grass beneath the ciphers indicate that the service was a wedding gift. On grounds of style an elaborate armorial tea set and a matching garniture of vases may provisionally be grouped with the porcelain made for Denmark. Among the remaining continental pieces are the several armorial platters from a service made for the ducal family of Anhalt in Germany with a decidedly Teutonic decoration.

American Lowestoft is all of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. It is composed mostly of pieces bearing the arms of the United States: the full-spread American eagle, a shield on its breast, over its head a constellation of stars, in its beak a ribbon with the motto E Pluribus Unum, and an olive branch in one claw and arrows in the other. The widespread use of this proud design was our young republic’s answer to the vogue for coats of arms in Europe. A tea and coffee service bears this decoration, as do also several pieces from two “Fitzhugh” sets, one in green, the other in orange. Individual cups and saucers show pictures of American ships engaged in the China trade.

The reader desiring more detailed information on the subject is referred to J. A. Lloyd Hyde’s Oriental Lowestoft (New York, 1936). The visitor to the exhibition may also wish to study the Chinese export porcelain shown in the American Wing, which is specially rich in elaborate pieces, such as punch bowls, made for the American market.